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SUBJECT: INVESTOR IN ID CARD BUSINESS GIVES HIS TAKE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS II FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) In a March 27 meeting with Ambassador, the Amcit President and CEO of the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund (AAEF), which has a 25 per cent stake the French company Sagem's concession to produce the voter ID cards, went to great lengths to explain that the AAEF is not at fault for delays in the ID issuance process. In an overview of the process, he said that of the approximately 737,000 citizens without passports (according to the GOA's voter registry list), only about 400,000 actually require voter ID cards. He believes that most of these people will get their IDs in time to vote. Of the remaining 300,000 plus names on the registry, according to him, 200,000 have left Albania and are unlikely to return for fear of losing their status in other countries, others are incorrect entries, and still others are citizens in smaller regions who do not care about elections and will not vote.

¶2. (C) Currently Sagem is producing 15,000 cards a day, but after the election crunch ends on June 15, the AAEF estimates that Sagem will produce less than 3,000 a day. He said that Sagem has received 350,000 applications and printed 230,000 cards, but only 50,000 citizens have actually picked up their cards. He said some people who have applied are confused and do not know that their cards are ready to be picked up. He also added that the SP's recent calls for free IDs have slowed applications considerably because people are waiting to see if they will indeed be free. (Note: Senior SP strategist Kastriot Islami admitted this problem as well. End note.) Finally, he said that PM Berisha is aiming at having 1.2 million cards issued prior to the elections; a target AAEF believes is achievable.

¶3. (C) Comment: In mid-2008, the GOA granted the French company Sagem a concession to produce biometric ID cards and passports. Despite the fact that AAEF has no management role in Sagem, it is clearly concerned that it could somehow be blamed for flaws in the process. Defensive throughout the meeting that he requested, the AAEF President said it is not the AAEF's responsibility to encourage people to apply for cards. These numbers from the AAEF may be the most accurate at this point and differ considerably from some recent GOA pronouncements that 300,000 people have received ID cards. Numerous hurdles remain, such as the opening of distribution centers, but it seems that most voters who need and want an ID will be able to get one, if they apply soon.

¶4. (C) Comment Cont'd: Nevertheless, it also seems almost certain that a sizable number of voters will not have ID cards come election day, whether by choice or because of bungling on the part of Sagem or the GOA. Many voters are unable or unwilling to pay the approximately 12 dollar fee for the cards, while others who don't plan on voting in any event may not bother to apply for cards until after the elections. (Note: The GOA claim that its recent reduction of the fee -- in essence, a poll tax -- is so much legerdemain:

the applicant is still required to pay the full sum up front and to be reimbursed later, thus still effectively disenfranchising those without ready cash to spare. The burden is particularly onerous on typically large Albanian families containing several voting age adults. End note.) In this case, whichever side loses the elections may well point to this group of ID-less voters and cry foul, claiming that it was their supporters who were disenfranchised by the lack of IDs.

WITHERS